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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a project that examined the use of common case studies across undergraduate special education, psychology, sociology, and health sciences classes to promote a common understanding of the needs of students with learning and behavior problems and to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration among future school professionals. During the project, participating instructors met prior to the beginning of each quarter to determine which courses within the participating departments or programs offered the best "blend." The syllabi for the courses were reviewed to determine where in the quarter the case studies would be presented and participating instructors met again to share cases that might lend themselves to specific course objectives. Once the case was chosen, each instructor suggested additions and subtractions to provide enough information for their discipline-specific questions. When the case study was sufficiently multidimensional, each instructor contributed one discipline-specific question that students were required to address and presented the case to his or her class. In addition to answering discipline-relevant questions, students were given the opportunity to participate in cross-disciplinary, problem-solving meetings. Future project goals are identified and a post-collaboration evaluation form is attached. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Keeping Everyone On The Same Page:

Using Common Case Studies Across Programs

Paper presented at the 75th Annual Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children
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Since the passage of PL 94-142 in 1975, an increasing number of students with learning and behavior problems have received most or all of their instruction in general education classrooms. This trend has been strengthened by school reform efforts that focus on providing educational services to all students in general education classrooms via collaboration between general education teachers, special education teachers, and related services personnel (Corbett, 1990; DeBevoise, 1986; Friend & Cook, 1990). In addition, potential decreases in funding for special education and related services underscore the need for school-based professionals to work collaboratively when serving students with special needs.

Most definitions of collaboration refer to a process of shared problem-solving and decision-making that occurs between at least two people for the purpose of achieving common goals (Friend & Cook, 1992; Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1994; Heron & Harris, 1993; Sugai & Tindal, 1993). Collaboration training tends to be offered primarily in special education teacher preparation programs and, to a lesser degree, in elementary and secondary teacher training programs (Hudson & Glomb, in press). Few, if any, preservice programs directed at future related service professionals such as school psychologists, social workers, and physical therapists provide provide instruction in or an orientation to collaborative problem-solving in school-based settings. By the time these individuals might receive such training at the graduate level, their discipline-specific philosophies and viewpoints tend to be well established. A potential result of this difference in preservice training is that team members enter these collaborative partnerships with different paradigmatic belief systems about where and how students with special learning needs should be served (Hunsaker & Johnson, 1992). These fundamental differences may prevent team members from committing to common goals and lead to considerable resistance on the part of some team members. Since changing the belief systems of inservice practitioners can be a long and arduous process (Tharp & Gillmore, 1988), the need exists for all preservice training programs to provide instruction and experiences that improve the chances that everyone will be "on the same page" when they enter their respective fields (Hudson & Glomb, in press).

Case studies have been used effectively to assist preservice teachers in addressing school-based issues within a problem-solving context (Cranston-Gingras, Raines, Paul, Epanchin, & Rosselli, 1997; Kagan, 1993; Kaufman, Mastart, Nuttycombe, Trent, & Hallahan, 1993; Greenwood & Parkay, 1989; Noordhoff & Klienfeld, 1993; Rasninski, 1989; Shulman, 1991; Wassermann, 1994) and have long been used in psychology and social work training programs (references). While there is evidence that common case studies are used across teacher preparation programs at some institutions (see Cranston et.al., 1997; Hudson & Glomb, in press), there appears to be a lack of cross-disciplinary use across undergraduate programs such as psychology, sociology, and health sciences that serve as "feeders" for graduate programs in school psychology, social work, and physical therapy. The purpose of this project is to examine the use of common case studies across undergraduate special education, psychology, sociology and health sciences classes for the purpose of promoting a common understanding of the needs of students with learning and behavior problems, and encouraging cross-disciplinary collaboration of future school professionals.

Development and Use of Cases

Choosing the Participating Courses and Developing the Case

Participating instructors meet prior to the beginning of each quarter to determine which courses within each participating department or program will offer the best "blend". For example, during the Fall 1996 quarter, a psychology assessment course, a course on marraige and family dynamics offered through the Sociology Department, and an introductory special education course that focuses on policies and procedures were chosen as the participating courses. The syllabi for those course are then reviewed to determine where in the quarter the case studies would be presented. The week of presentation is usually just after mid-terms and is consistent across the participating courses.

A few days after the courses and presentation times are identified, participating instructors meet again to share cases that might lend themselves to the specific course objectives. Once a case is chosen, each instructor then suggests additions, subtractions, or

"twists" that will provide enough "fodder" for their discipline specific questions. When the case study is sufficiently multidimensional, each instructor contributes one discipline-specific question that students are required to address. These questions are intended to serve as "lead" questions, and students are also instructed to generate their own questions or issues that they address during their collaborative problem-solving group meeting. The case used for the Fall 1997 collaborative problem-solving groups is attached.

Presentation of Case Studies In Classes

Each participating instructor presents the case to his or her class. Students are told to answer the questions posed by the instructor, and identify solutions to additional problems or tasks that they identify as they read through the case. Students are also instructed to reference answers that come from course readings or other professional resources, and clearly identify answers, or parts of answers that were based on personal beliefs as opposed to information from the literature. The instructor then describes the project to the class, and recruits volunteers for the cross-disciplinary problem-solving meeting. A list of all students interested is then forwarded to the project coordinator, and students are assigned to groups of three to four students. Based on the schedule information provided by the students, a time and place are identified and students are notified via phone or e-mail. Interested students are told at that time to bring their completed assignments to the meeting. All students in each class are required to address the case as a homework assignment. Students who volunteer for the cross-disciplinary meeting are given extra credit.

The Collaborative Problem-Solving Meeting

The collaborative problem-solving meeting typically occurs two or three days after the case has been presented. At the beginning of the meeting, students are assigned to groups, and one of the participating instructors reviews the case. The special education instructor then discusses the "rules" or guidelines for the collaborative problem-solving activity by presenting a list of characteristcs of effective Collaborators (Pugach & Johnson). Students are then instructed to work in their groups for approximately 40 minutes, and revise their assignments

based on the group discussion. The participating instructors circulate throuhout the groups and answer discipline-specific questions about the case.

At the end of the collaborative problem-solving activity, all of the participating students and instructors reconvene in the original meeting room, and students are asked to fill out the attached evaluation. The instructors then facilitate an open discussion about the students' and instructors' impressions of and reactions to the small group interactions. Student comment tend to reflect an interest and intrigue in the different paradigms represented in the group discussions and suggest that these structiured group interactions hold promise from facilitating effective cross-disciplinary teaming. For example, one of the special education students who participated in the "Jeremy" case (attached) commented that she had a difficult time with the sociology student's "pre-occupation" with family issues. She commented several times during the group interaction that family issues, while important to consider, were not variables that "they" (referring to the team) had any control over. The sociology student finally responded by saying, "Wait a minute - as the social worker for this family, it IS my job!" to which the special education student sat back and said, "Oh yeah! I forgot!". During the debriefing session for that case, a psychology student remarked that he wasn't familiar with PL 94-142 and the special education students input regarding zero reject changed the way he viewed the case and addressed certain issues. Another psychology student who participated in this case echoed a sentiment that has been expressed during each debriefing session thus far: "We need to get off of our high horse at times and listen to others or we're going to miss important stuff about these kids."

Where Do We Go From Here?

This approach has been used at three different institutions. Thus far, student participants have been volunteers, and the programs involved have been special education, sociology, and psychology. The goals for next year are to:

- Identify certain courses and quarters that will require a cross-disciplinary problem-solving assignment for all students enrolled in the course.

- Provide more systematic collaboration training at the beginning of each semester in the participating classes.

- Include a Health Sciences course.

- Include a Multi-Cultural Education course.

Develop evaluation procedures for determining the extent to which participation in preservice cross-disciplinary problem-solving activities affects future performance in and beliefs about cross-dosciplinary collaboration.

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Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration Project

POST-COLLABORATION EVALUATION

Name:_____ Quarter/Course: _____
Major:_____ Year in School: _____

1. Were there any questions that you could not answer prior to this meeting? If so, which one(s)?

2. Did the content of your answers change after this meeting? Explain.

3. Did your beliefs about this case change after the meeting? If so, how?

4. Would you like to participate in future cross-disciplinary problem-solving activities?

Comments: